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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 KUWAIT 000794

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FOR NEA/ARP

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TAGS: ECON KU PGOV PREL

SUBJECT: NEW MINISTER OF HOUSING: BREAKING GROUND ON DISCRIMINATION?

Classified By: Ambassador Deborah Jones for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

Summary

¶1. (C) Minister for Housing and Development Affairs Dr. Moudhi Abdul Aziz Al-Homoud told Ambassador she will deal with the uncertainties of Kuwaiti's obstreperous "revolving governments" (Note: with two dissolutions in as many years. End Note.) by focusing on a "five-year development plan" aimed at diversification, privatization, increasing investment returns, combating corruption and empowering women. The Minister said ending discrimination in housing allowances for Kuwaiti women married to non-Kuwaitis is a priority. Acknowledging the challenges facing her from an often obstructionist and increasingly reactionary National Assembly, the Minister regretted the government's (Read: Al Sabah leadership's) "lack of muscle."

End Summary.

Reforming the Ministry

¶2. (C) In an extremely cordial introductory meeting with the Ambassador July 9, Housing and Development Affairs Minister Dr. Moudhi Al-Homoud said her biggest adjustment in her new position had been the transition from academia to the Ministry's relatively laid back environment. The U.S.-educated Dr. Al-Homoud, formerly Chancellor of Kuwait's Open Arab University (2004-2008), said she had instituted daily 7:30 am meetings to ensure that her staff had guidance prior to hitting their desks at 9:00 and responding to the many requests received by her ministry. The minister, one of two women in the current cabinet and only the third in Kuwaiti history, said she was trying to instill the concept of transparency and accountability in her staff through her own example, using the internet to ensure all had access to the same information. While acknowledging that productivity and the use of technology were areas for improvement in her 1,400 person ministry, the Minister was cautiously optimistic as she described the government's "five year plan" and her own efforts to achieve its goals.

Housing Discrimination

¶3. (C) In response to the Ambassador's query concerning a topic of high interest here, Dr. Al-Homoud said she had made it a priority to reform Kuwaiti "discriminatory" "housing laws" which currently prohibit Kuwaiti women married to non-nationals from receiving free housing. Kuwait free housing is for Kuwaiti families, the Minister explained; when a Kuwaiti woman marries a non-Kuwaiti, their children are not considered Kuwaitis. Therefore, these women - if divorced - are technically left homeless. The Minister acknowledged that, in accordance with this principle, neither do single

Kuwaiti men receive housing. However, she argued, society cannot have its most vulnerable members, i.e. women and children, left homeless. She vowed to continue to press on this bill. (Note: The week following this meeting, Dr. Al-Homoud instructed Housing Authority members to conduct a study establishing the constitutional right of all Kuwaiti women to government housing. Some sources alleged this was in fact the result of pressure from MP's who'd sought female votes by agreeing to press the Housing Authority for this change. End Note.)

Visibly Liberal in a Conservative National Assembly

¶4. (C) Ambassador asked Dr. Al-Homoud, who together with the Minister of Education has come under attack from Salafist members of the National Assembly for not covering their hair, whether her appointment had come as a surprise to her. Not the fact, she replied, but the timing, given the ultra-conservative nature of the parliament. She said she realized she was in a race against time to accomplish her goals before another dissolution occurred, which she implies might be the unavoidable result of Islamist obduracy. What the country needed, she averred, was stronger guidance from its leaders, who frankly "lacked muscle."

¶5. (C) Comment: The elephant in the room in all our exchanges with new ministers has been, of course, the fact that the Amir has twice dissolved the government in as many years after failing to control a fractious National Assembly.

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Many anticipate this will happen again, come December. Despite her concerns, however, Dr. Al-Homoud ended on a positive note, saying she believed that her own children, all of whom excel academically and professionally in international sectors, were representative of the next generation of Kuwaitis who would lead Kuwait forward. "They will not let these others (i.e. Salafists and tribals) hold us back." End Comment.

Bio Note

¶6. (U) Dr. Moudhi Abdul Aziz Al-Homoud was appointed Minister of State for Housing and Development Affairs in May 2008. Prior to this, she served as Chancellor of the Open Arab University from 2004-2008. She was born in 1949 and received her degree in business administration from Kuwait University in 1973, an MBA from North Texas State University in 1976 and a Ph.D. in London. She and her husband, who also studied in the U.S., have five children, three of whom have graduated from NY's Columbia University, Wharton and MIT.

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